DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 288 FL 007 785

AUTHOR Daniels, Harvey A.; And Others
TITLE What Teachers Believe: An Historical Investigation of Language Attitudes and the Implications for Bidialectalism in the Schools.
PUB DATE Dec 75
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at a meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (December 30, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Biculturalism; *Dialects; Discriminatory Attitudes (Social); *Educational Attitudes; *Language Attitudes; *Language Usage; Language Variation; Mutual Intelligibility; Nonstandard Dialects; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Bidialectal Education

ABSTRACT

Bidialectal approaches to American public school teaching presume a relativistic view of language on the part of teachers, a requirement which has received little scrutiny since bidialectalism has become a predominant approach to divergent language in school settings. Evidence drawn from documents of the American teaching profession over the past fifty years suggests, however, that the rank-and-file teacher is committed to an absolutist position on language in the classroom. During the 1960's a shift is seen in which concern about nonstandard dialects partially replaces disputes over usage issues, but the underlying inclination towards an absolute view of language prevails throughout. This investigation further suggests that teachers' language attitudes may pose a serious obstacle to the success of bidialectal programs. The work of linguists in helping to develop good language programs is far from over, but to move beyond the current state of affairs, better research is needed. (Author/DB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED125288

What Teachers Believe: An Historical Investigation of Language Attitudes and the Implications for Bidialectalism in the Schools

Harvey A. Daniels
Rae A. Moses
Robert A. Gundlach

FL007785

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Harvey A. Daniels
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Paper presented to the Linguistic Society of America Annual Meeting, December 30, 1975.

It has been about a decade since linguists became actively involved in the development of school policies concerning nonstandard language. A part of the difficult readjustments of the middle sixties was a realization that social dialects demanded scholarly, educational, and governmental attention. Quickly, the influence of linguists began to be felt across the curriculum, and especially in the planning of bilingual and bidialectal language programs.

This involvement was not always welcomed. In a 1968 article entitled New Linguists Menace Nation's Schools, Lawrence Hall of Bowdoin College warned that "the self-styled new linguists are trying to take over the teaching of English with an elaborately fabricated, well-financed, and highly publicized crusade that has overwhelmed opponents and threatens to inflict on the nation's schools "a modern jabberwocky on the grand scale." "With Madison Avenue cunning," Hall warned, linguists seek to inflict on the unsuspecting schools "a kind of space-age macro-nonsense" and an "erudite form of illiteracy."[1] If Time magazine's 1975 essay on language is to be believed, Hall's worst fears have now been realized. The American language," says Time, "has lost not only its melody but a lot of its meaning Schoolchildren and even college students often seem disastrously ignorant of words; they stare uncomprehending, at simple declarative English."[2]

More about the current "crisis" later. For now it is enough to note that it has been a turbulent ten years for everyone involved in school language programs, and that the task of developing sound language policies is far from over. In this paper, we want to take up one particularly important aspect of the problem, and that is the continuing debate over bidialectalism and the issues surrounding it. Specifically, we want to focus on teachers' language attitudes as they affect the chances for successful implementation of bidialectal language programs in the schools. While the central role of teachers' language attitudes has always been at least acknowledged in this connection, we feel that a look at the deeper historical and wider cultural context of these attitudes will be useful.

It was largely at the urging of linguists that teachers were asked in the mid-1960's to take a new approach to language in their classrooms. Forget the tradition of eradication, teachers were told, and try to adopt an accepting, supportive attitude towards whatever language your students may bring with them to school. Only in this way will you be able to nuture the trust which will be needed when you later attempt to add standard English to your students' speech repertoire. A typical version of this demand on teachers was outlined by Karen Hess:

> The sensitivities of minority groups demand a new and humane basis for the teacher's actions in teaching a Standard English -- namely the understanding that a Standard English is taught not because it is "correct," but because it is a socially, educationally and vocationally useful dialect. This requirement suggests a reorientation of teachers from an absolutist to a relativistic attitude toward language -- an orientation which may be contrary to the current value systems of many teachers.[3]

Hess emphasizes a proposition which has been central to virtually all bidialectal programs; namely, that teachers must maintain a relativistic attitude towards nonstandard language in order for such a program to succeed.

The language attitudes of the teacher, in fact, can be seen as the major difference between eradication and bidialectalism: in eradication, the teacher is seeking to replace an unacceptable form of speech with the approved one; in bidialectalism, the teacher accepts the student's natural dialect and leaves it intact while adding to it another dialect deemed useful in some -- but not all -- situations. As Hess points out, however, relativistic language attitudes of the kind required in bidialectal programs probably run counter to the absolutist belief systems of many teachers.

This tension between absolute and relative views of language, though, did not appear in its first incarnation during the 1960's. The history of English teaching in America shows that this debate has, in various forms, plagued teachers throughout this century. In the face of a strong absolutist tradition, a few scholars began around 1900 to advance notions about language which were rather relativistic for their age. Thomas Lounsbury of Yale University asserted in 1903 that:

> ...there is no such thing as a language becoming corrupt...The words which constitute it have no real significance of their own. It is the meaning which men put into them that gives them all the efficacy they possess.... Never was there a more ridiculous reversal of the actual order of events than that contained in (the) assertion that "no nation hath long survived the decrepitude of its language."[4]

Lounsbury's ideas notwithstanding, the major concern of English teachers of the age was precisely with corruption and its impact on the health of the nation. The National Council of Teachers of English, which was first organized during this period, devised the following pledge to be recited by students during Better Speech Week in 1918.

> I love the United States of America. I love my country's flag.
> I love my country's language. I promise:

1. That I will not dishonor my country's speech by leaving off the last syllable of words.
2. That I will say a good American "yes" and "no" in place of an Indian grunt "un-hum" and "nup-um" or a foreign "ya" or "ye," and "nope".
3. That I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud rough tones, by enunciating distinctly, and by speaking pleasantly, clearly and sincerely.[5]

A number of voices were quickly raised against the pledge and its absolutist mentality. In 1920, W. P. Reeves wrote in the English Journal that American dialects and idioms were not only natural and healthy, but a positive expression of tne diversity of American life as well.[6] Enough similar objections were raised in the early twenties that the NCTE was obliged to abandon its support of both Better Speech Week and the pledge by the end of the decade. In an attempt to settle the absolutist-relativist controversy, the NCTE sponsored several research monographs on usage, beginning in 1927. These studies, conducted first by Sterling Leonard and later by Marckwardt and Walcott, all tended to show that English teachers were trying to preserve in the classroom niceties of language long since abandoned by even the most educated speakers in the language community. By 1935, these findings prompted an NCTE commission to declare:

> Good English is that form of speech which is appropriate to the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to the speaker and listener. It is the product of custom, neither cramped by rule nor freed from all restraint; it is never fixed, but changes with the organic life of the language.[7]

By this time, however, a serious problem was becoming apparent. In spite of the increasingly consistent efforts of the profession's leadership to promote relativistic attitudes towards language, the absolutist tradition rolled along untouched in most classrooms. Albert Marckwardt took several pages of English Journal in 1935 to complain of the teachers' indifference to the research on usage.[8]

Seventeen years later, in 1952, the leaders of the NCTE were still expressing disappointment in the response of classroom teachers. In an English Journal article, Robert Pooley declared:

> No story is more exciting than the successful battle of the National Council of Teachers of English to liberalize the teaching of English usage...But (the) facts, all available in print, many of them for a decade or more, are not generally known by teachers of English...We have secured, at length, a partial acceptance of the truths about language which every linguist takes for granted. But the battle is not yet won.[9]

Pooley's exhortation was gentle, but its underlying message was clear enough. Teachers' attitudes towards language weren't becoming more relativistic fast enough to please the increasingly frustrated leaders of their profession.

The debate was focused but hardly resolved in subsequent years. In 1956, another NCTE commission presented a more schematic version of the relativist line:

1) language changes constantly;
2) change is normal and represents not corruption but improvement;
3) spoken language is the language;
4) correctness rests on usage;
5) all usage is relative.[10]

By this time, the leaders of the Council had been arguing persistently for a relativistic view of language for over 30 years, and yet the classroom practices of most teachers seemed largely unaffected. Around this time, a new development deflected the controversy, and debates over usage matters subsided dramatically by the early sixties. That development was, of course, the relatively sudden entry of "culturally different" students into the consciousness, if not immediately the classrooms, of American teachers. Quickly the major language issue for educators became nonstandard dialects rather than usage. What is most important to note, however, is that the

dialect issue did not so much replace as subsume the usage controversy.

While many of the earliest responses to the problem of non-standard dialects drew heavily on the absolutist tradition, and accordingly prescribed the eradication of these dialects, linguists and some educators moved quickly to a consensus that bidialectalism was the appropriate approach. Bidialectal language programs however, as Karen Hess pointed out, inevitably require that teachers develop relativistic attitudes towards language. Thus, the sudden need for teachers to deal with speakers of nonstandard dialects seems to have both extended and intensified the pressure on teachers to change their attitudes: a demand which has been placed on them in various forms for the past 50 years. Hess's caution in 1973 that relativistic language attitudes may be contrary to the current value systems of many teachers brings us up to the present. In spite of the long debate among American English teachers, during which relativist forces generally controlled the professional organizations, it is generally acknowledged that an absolutist view of language continues to reign in the classroom. The durability of this absolutist tradition has been a frustrating mystery to those who have attempted to break it. Most of the theories which have been advanced to explain this phenomenon center around some kind of strong oral tradition of absolutist values passed along from one generation of teachers to another.[11] However, there is certainly a question whether a tradition strictly internal to the profession can adequately explain the longevity and intensity of the absolutist attitudes we have been considering.

So far, we have been speculating about the sources of teachers' language attitudes: we have looked at scholars, professional leaders, and linguists

as possible sources of these beliefs. Again, we must ask why it is that the absolutist attitudes of school teachers are so difficult to penetrate and change. If we look at language from the teacher's point of view, what will we see? The quote from Time Magazine at the beginning of this paper - the one about the decline of American English - may do more to improve our understanding of teachers' attitudes than any study of the professional history can.

The appeals to teachers which we have cited -- first to liberalize their notions of usage, and now to adopt the relativistic attitudes necessary for bidialectal programs -- have always assumed that teachers' professional attitudes towards language were the ones which required alteration. In other words, we have assumed that teachers will respond to a professional appeal about language, and that their personal attitudes would be brought into line with the appropriate professional response. The fact that teachers have generally not adjusted their professional attitudes or their classroom practice certainly suggests that something must be getting in the way -- and this might well be conflict with their personal beliefs about language, beliefs which spring more from the general than than the teaching culture. It may be that we have been asking too much of teachers: that we have expected them to rise above the commonly held beliefs (and misconceptions) about language which plague the general populace -- a group of which they are very much a part.

One need not look far today to discover abounding support for absolutist notions of language in the general culture. We are currently, in fact, in the middle of a period of near-hysteria concerning the imminent collapse of our language. The decline in SAT scores which was announced this Fall elicited an outpouring of concern from newspapers, magazines, and television stations, and much of the displeasure centered around the idea that young

people simply could no longer speak English. TV Guide, put on the defensive by much theorizing that television was to blame for the communicative handicaps of American youth, offered a tough editorial which laid the responsibility on lame-brained liberal educators, who have given us:

> youngsters running off to live in drug-soaked communes, to engage in mindless sexual promiscuity, to produce a crop of illegitimate children, and to send VD rates soaring. And, presto-magico, all about us we saw a nation of Johnnies who could no longer speak English -- I mean, like, wow! y'know, man, like, y'know, heavy! No vocabulary at all![12]

Time Magazine's essay, entitled Can't Anyone Here Speak English, offered Professor J. Mitchell Morse of Temple University the opportunity to reveal that what some people call Black English is, in fact, "the shuffling speech of slavery."[13]

Time also quoted and liberally praised Edwin Newman, the NBC newsman whose curmudgeonly book, Strictly Speaking subtitled, Will America Be the the Death of English? spent 26 weeks on the top of 1975 bestseller lists. Newman makes no bones about the crisis: "Language is in decline," he asserts because there has been a "wholesale breakdown" in the enforcement of language rules.[14] The kind of rule which Newman would like to see enforced, for example, is the one against sprinkling conversations with the "empty" phrase, "y'know." Newman's Theory about the origins of the "y'know crisis" is not without interest. It began, Newman explains,

> among poor blacks who, because of various disabilities imposed on them, often did not speak well and for whom y'know was a request for assurance that they had been understood. From that sad beginning it spread among people who wanted to show themselves sympathetic to blacks, and among those who saw it as the latest thing and either could not resist or did not want to be left out.[15]

Earlier this month, Newsweek Magazine ran a cover story entitled "Why Johnny Can't Write," which summarized much of the current language and literacy crisis. In the article "structural linguists" were identified as "major villains" in the supposed collapse of American childrens' language skills.[16]

The feeling that we are today living through a linguistic crisis unique in human history has, of course, been with us for centuries. Jonathan Swift wrote in 1710 that a sudden and disastrous turnabout had occurred in the English language, and warned that unless immediate measures were taken to stem the tide of corruption the language would be hopelessly degenerated in twenty years.[17] In the nineteenth century, this cry was taken up, particularly by Walter Savage Landor, who announced that the English language, between 1775 and 1825, had become more rapidly and thoroughly corrupt than any tongue ever spoken by man.[18] Later in the nineteenth century, it was widely argued that a dangerous, illiterate, and mindless new mass medium was about to deliver the coup de grace to the English language. This was, of course, the newspaper, and blame was heaped upon them in much the same way that we currently abuse television.[19] Around the turn of the century another palpable crisis arrived. The president of the Modern Language Association bemoaned to his colleagues "the deplorable lack of skill in the use of speech so apparent among us," [20] and Princeton University felt itself obliged to set up a clinic for its undergraduates diagnosed as illiterate.[21] The letters columns of the Nation and Harpers were liberally sprinkled with doomsayers. One writer drew the issue especially clearly in 1906 letter: "we stand powerless or struggle hopelessly against the tidal wave of coarse, slovenly, low-bred language, which is swallowing up our children in its flood.

Must we see the dear English of former days swept under to destruction?" [23]

Today, as always, the popular culture abounds with warnings that a linguistic apocalypse is near. What effect can these dire predictions have on teachers -- people who not only feel intimately involved with the life of the language, but also are held accountable by the popular press for much of any purported decline? We would like to assume that the teachers' allegiance is to the cooler, and more relativistic view of their professional leadership. But what about the impact of the powerful, omnipresent, and linguistically absolutist popular press? As things currently stand, we have no good way of determining what forces have the greatest influence on the thinking and attitude-formation of school teachers.

The fact remains that the language programs we need, especially for speakers of nonstandard dialects, require relativistic language attitudes on the part of teachers. By this we simply mean that teachers must be able to accept their students as they come to school, in their language as in every other aspect of their cultural inheritance. Teachers need to see that while language varieties may have differing social weight, they do not exist in moral or intellectual hierarchies. The historical evidence, some of which we have touched on today, suggests three main things:

First, that linguists and some educators have recognized for decades the crucial need for relativistic language attitudes among teachers.

Second, that these attitudes have generally <u>not</u> been present among the vast majority of schoolteachers,

and Third, that persistent attempts to develop relativistic attitudes through the ordinary professional channel have not been successful.

This longstanding bottleneck suggests to us that the work of linguists in helping school people to develop good language programs is far from over. In order to move beyond the current state of affairs, we will need better research: more information about the sources, operation, impact, and especially ways of changing the language attitudes and related practices of teachers in the classroom. Linguists have already made important contributions to education over the past decade. If we can now move, through research, towards making our ideas more accessible, and more persuasive to teachers, we will enormously enlarge that contribution.

[1] Lawrence S. Hall, " 'New Linguists' Menace Nation's Schools", School and Society, March 2, 1968, p. 125.

[2] "Can't Anyone Here Speak English?" Time, August 25, 1975, p. 34.

[3] Karen Hess, "Dialects and Dialect Learning: Where We're At", English Education, October-November, 1973, p. 27.

[4] Thomas R. Lounsbury, "Is English Becoming Corrupt?" (Second Paper), Harper's Monthly, January 1903, p. 194.

[5] Much of the historical material used in this section of the paper is drawn from "An Examination of the Attitudes of the NCTE Toward Language", Raven I. McDavid (ed.) National Council of Teachers of English Research Report No. 4, Champaign, Illinois, 1965.

[6] W. P. Reeves, "Our Pragmatic Language", cited by Betty Gawthorp, "1911-1929", in Raven I. McDavid (ed.), op. cit., pp. 11-12.

[7] W. W. Hatfield, "An Experience Curriculum in English", cited by C. Michael Lightner, "1930-1945", in Raven I. McDavid (ed.) op. cit. p. 23.

[8] Albert H. Marckwardt, "The High School Teacher and a Standard of Usage", in Lightner, op. cit. p. 22.

[9] Robert C. Pooley, "Publicizing Our Aims", quoted in Doris C. Meyers, "1945-1954", in Raven I. McDavid (ed.) op. cit. p. 46.

[10] "English Language Arts in the Secondary School", Commission on the English Curriculum of the National Council of Teachers of English, cited by Geraldine Russell in "1955-1963" in Raven I. McDavid (ed.) op. cit. p. 49.

[11] See, for example, Mary Vaiana Taylor, "The Folklore of Usage", College English, April 1974, pp. 756-768.

[12] Edith Efron, "The 'New' Illiteracy: Blaming It on TV Skirts Real Issues", TV Guide, October 11-17, 1975, p. A-6.

[13] Time, op. cit., p. 36.

[14] Edwin Newman, Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English? (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 17, 24.

[15] Ibid, p. 28.

[16] "Why Johnny Can't Write", Newsweek, December 8, 1975, p. 60.

[17] Thomas R. Lounsbury, "Is English Becoming Corrupt? (First Paper) Harpers Monthly, December 1902, p. 108.

[18] Ibid, p. 112.

[19] Lounsbury (Second Paper), p. 193.

[20] "Special Correspondence: Central Division of the Modern Language Association", The Nation, January 11, 1906, p. 39.

[21] "Good English", The Nation, June 27, 1934, p. 720.

[22] Sarah Willard Hiestand, "Slovenly Speaking of English", The Nation, January 25, 1906, pp. 72, 73.